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ABSTRACT

Geography instruction must become an integral part of the high school curriculum. A number of recent state, national, and international surveys have shown the serious results of neglect of geography education, particularly with regard to international knowledge and understanding. For example, in a recent survey of 3000 undergraduates in 185 American 2- and 4-year colleges conducted by the Educational Testing Service, the mean score for the entire sample was 43 out of a total 101. Geographic education is vital to correct the ignorance about our own country and the world and to give future generations the knowledge and understanding necessary to manage the earth's resources. Beyond this, it is also important for students to realize that all problems affecting society occur within a geographic context, for example, the loss of agricultural land to urbanization, zoning decisions, the effects of toxic wastes, and geographic segregation of racial groups. As a school subject, geography provides methods for asking questions about places on earth and their relationships to the people who live in them. Geographic inquiry begins with the essential questions: where are things located and why does their location affect us? The Association of American Geographers and the National Council of Geographic Education will soon publish guidelines for K-12 geographic education. These guidelines will suggest how schools can integrate basic geographic concepts into their organized program of studies and identify the knowledge, skills, and perspectives essential to geographic education. (LP)

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The Essentiality of Geography in the High Schools

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SO 015 670

When Bill White, Social Studies Coordinator of the Jefferson County Public Schools, asked me last December to get involved in this conference, his invitation could not have come at a better time. Our department was preparing a letter to be sent to all of Colorado's school superintendents. We wanted to get in touch with the schools to offer our help in meeting the new CU Arts & Science admissions requirement of a year of high school geography. This requirement was being questioned, and we saw this conference as an opportunity to respond.

Our response today is both direct and indirect. I will speak directly to the issue of the essentiality of geography in the high schools. But talk about a subject is too limited. What is also needed is a demonstration of geographic analysis. That is what my colleagues in this session will do. Their papers, all in urban geography, are intended to illustrate the kinds of analyses done in geography courses in our department.

In order to briefly explain the new College requirements, let me begin by quoting from the September 26, 1983, Colorado Daily:

> In a move to admit better qualified students and "to put pressure on the high schools to improve their curricula," the faculty of CU's College of Arts and Sciences has adopted more stringent admissions requirements that are scheduled to

take effect fall semester 1988. The college will require incoming freshmen to have taken in high school:

--four units of English, including two years of composition;

--three units of math, including Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II;

--three units of natural science, including one unit of physics or chemistry and two units of laboratory science;

--three units of a single foreign language;

--three units of social science; including one year of U.S. or world history and one year of geography.

Students who do not meet the requirements can still be admitted to the college if they have high ACT or SAT scores and if they are in the top half of their graduating classes. However, students admitted who have "deficient" high school coursework will have to make the courses up at the University. . .

As the news of these requirements went out, both positive and negative responses came back. Vicki Chrisman Santamaria, writing a letter to the editor of the Colorado Alumnus applauding the new College admissions requirements, said:

. . . Thank you for your recent decision to adopt more stringent requirements. . . . In my high school of approximately 500 students, we don't even offer two years of English composition. Only 10 to 15 students take physics or a quarter or two of geography each year. . . .

Some school people, however, complained to University officials. They protested that the requirements were too restrictive, leaving little choice for students in the high school curriculum, and that the schools didn't have the resources to provide for the kind of curriculum that would be demanded. Many of the questions raised were about Geography. I received a number of these complaints directly from superintendents because, as Chairman of the Geography Department, I had written a letter to them explaining the requirement and offering the Department's

assistance. Although many of the responses I received supported the new requirement, some were hostile. I began to feel like the messenger who was blamed for the message. In addition, some remarks mirrored the uneducated American view of geography so nicely captured by John Updike's Harry Rabbit who, upon hearing Nelson's announcement that he's majoring in geography, says:

> Geography! That's something they teach in the third grade! I never heard of a grownup studying geography. (1)

Geography does, however, have its defenders. I'd like to quote from three of them who have spoken at different times. The first was a former U.S. Commissioner of Education, addressing a national conference of College and University Presidents:

> Now is the time to begin really to teach the American people geography. . . Young people have stopped studying geography in about the seventh or eighth grade . . . and for the most part they were taught geography up to that time by teachers who stopped studying geography at about the same time in their school courses . . . So I would recommend that in some way throughout the secondary schools and in the colleges and universities a real emphasis now be laid upon acquainting the American citizens with the realities of the world through intensive courses in world geography. It is in these latter years of the educational scheme that the students have achieved the maturity necessary to the understanding of this important subject.(2)

The Commissioner quoted was John W. Studebaker, and he gave that speech in 1942. It could just as well have been given today.

Some time later, in 1970, another strong plea for geography was made by the novelist James Michener addressing social studies teachers in an article in the journal Social Education. Michener wrote:

> The more I work in the social studies field the more convinced I become that geography is the foundation of all. . . When I begin work on a new area . . . I invariably start with the best geography I can find. . . . I need to ground

myself in the fundamentals which have governed and in a sense limited human development. . . . The virtue of the geographical approach is that it forces the reader to relate man to his environment. It forestalls loose generalization founded mainly on good intentions or hope. It gives a solid footing to speculation and it reminds the reader that he is dealing with real human beings who are just as circumscribed as he. . . . With the growing emphasis on ecology and related problems of the environment, geography will undoubtedly grow in importance and relevance. . . . I suppose that my books on Hawaii, Israel and Spain have won a rather wide readership primarily because my work in the geography of these areas--really minute field work carried on over periods of many years--has provided a solid tactile base for what I had to say. My characters were not drifting in space; they were rooted in the ground.(3)

Dr. Paul Woodring, Distinguished psychologist, past Education Editor of Saturday Review, senior consultant to the Ford Foundation, and frequent commentator on the quality of American education, has recently written on The Persistent Problems of Education. This is some of what he wrote:

Of all the school subjects, geography is the most neglected in American schools. Few students study it in either high school or college, and what they learn in middle school or junior high (where it is sometimes lost in a social studies course) is clearly insufficient. . . .

Yet a knowledge of the landscapes, climates, boundaries, peoples, animals, plants, and other resources of the various continents, islands, nations, and states is basic to the study of history, political science, economics, geology, biology, and many other disciplines. It is also basic preparation for living in, understanding, and moving about in today's world. . . .

. . . [I]nternational conflicts have revealed our ignorance of Korea, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, Afghanistan, and the Falkland Islands. On a cruise ship crossing the Indian Ocean last winter, I was asked by a passenger whether the land mass silhouetted against the sunset ahead of us was South America. She was a Wellesley graduate. . . .

In normal schools, everyone planning to teach in an elementary school had a solid course in world geography. Today it is possible in some states to be certified for teaching all subjects up through the eighth grade without a single course in geography.

I do not know the reason for this neglect, but I am confident that it could easily be repaired. For anyone who wants to restore the basics, geography is a good place to start.(4)

The case for the essentiality of geography does not depend only on testimonies such as these. We have recently seen a number of state, national, and international surveys that have consistently shown the serious results of our neglect of geographic education. As persons attending a World History Conference will appreciate, the emphasis in most of these surveys has been on international knowledge and understanding.

The Dallas Times Herald recently conducted and published (December 11, 1983) tests in geography, science, and math, which were given to 12-year-olds in eight highly industrialized nations. American students ranked a weak fourth among students taking the geography exam. Among one group of Americans taking the test, more than 20% could not locate the United States on a world map and an equal percentage incorrectly identified Brazil as the United States.

College students fare no better. I was one of several consultants on the Educational Testing Service's recent survey of global understanding.(5) Incidentally, the strongest proponent for geography in this consulting group was not me, the geographer, but rather it was the eminent historian, William H. McNeill. This extensive and unprecedented study tested 3000 undergraduates in 185 American 2- and 4-year institutions. The mean score for the entire sample was 43 out of a possible 101. Less than 15% of the seniors and less than 10% of the freshmen got more than two-thirds correct. In a separate analysis, I

found that about 75% of the survey questions dealt with content that might be acquired in college geography courses.(6) Unfortunately, the average number of geography courses taken by the seniors sampled was a mere .56; 66% of the seniors took no geography.

It is a serious problem when our students fail to achieve a minimum standard in global understanding competencies. It is more serious when we overlook these deficiencies in our educational system. It is critical when we formulate national policies that rely on imprecise information and unclear interpretations about our own geography and that of other nations.

Our ignorance of own country and of the world will have dire consequences for our nation's welfare, strength, and global interdependence and for the effects we have on people in other nations. Geographic education is vital to correct this ignorance and can give future generations the knowledge and understanding they need to manage the earth's resources wisely.

Every day we use geographic knowledge and perceptions to make important decisions. What is dynamic and ever-fascinating is that these decisions, for good or ill, create, in turn, new geographical circumstances that come to influence our lives yet again. We interpret complicated factors in deciding where to live. Climate, topography, and drainage influence where we can safely build. Housing, schools, and transportation all bear on our aspirations for improving our lives. But this life is not entirely of our own making--our very livelihoods depend upon products and ideas and decisions that originate great distances

from where we live and work, often from abroad among peoples and places about which we are quite ignorant.

In a democracy the development of humane and effective public policies depends upon active participation of citizens who are broadly educated about their own society and its relations with the entire world. It is important to understand that all problems affecting society occur within a geographic context.

Some of these problems include the loss of primary agricultural land to urbanization, the congestion of highways while public transit systems face financial collapse, the effects of zoning decisions on urban land use development, the protection of watersheds from erosion, the probable effects of nuclear war on specific environments and peoples, the siting of nuclear power plants, safe disposal of radioactive and toxic wastes, geographic segregation by race, age, or economic status, inequitable distribution of economic resources within and between countries, environmental degradation, rational use of ocean resources, resettlement of refugees from war, political repression, and terrorism. It is important to note that policies formulated and carried out by governments and large corporations usually have worldwide geographic impacts.

We must strive to understand how the actions of our society influence other societies and how their actions affect us. A sound geographic education provides the perspectives, information, concepts and skills to understand ourselves, our relationship to the earth, and our interdependence with other peoples of the world. We must know where and why events are

occuring if we hope to apply our intelligence toward improving the quality of human life on this planet.

A knowledge of geography is useful not only in helping us understand the world but also to improve the ways we function in it. Geographic education satisfies a deep human need to know about other people and places, the natural environment, and the capacity of the earth to support human life. Thus, geographic education, contrary to an uneducated view, requires knowing much more than where things are located.

As a subject for study in the schools and as a humanistic and scientific inquiry, geography provides methods for asking questions about places on the earth and their relationships to the people who live in them. Geographic inquiry often begins with two essential questions: <u>where</u> are the things that affect or will affect our lives and <u>why</u> do they affect us and others? These questions lead to understandings and explanations of how and why the world can support us now and in the future. The first task is to locate places, describing and explaining their physical and human characteristics. Inquiry continues by exploring the relationships that develop as human beings shape and respond to their physical and cultural environments. This permits us to compare, contrast, and understand the world and its parts. Such knowledge helps us to manage the world's resources and to analyze a host of other problems that have significance because of the <u>spaces</u> they occupy and interact with on the earth's surface. In approaching problems, geography examines regions locally, nationally, and globally. With such regional knowledge we enhance our appreciation of cultural and

environmental diversity and gain valuable perspectives on human activities.

Geographers use many tools similar to other social and physical scientists but have special expertise in making and using maps to portray and study a variety of locations and distributions of physical and cultural features. Reading, interpreting, and making maps are skills integral to geographic education and to acquiring geographic knowledge.

In order to stimulate and guide our schools to provide the kind of geographic education that I have briefly described, the Association of American Geographers and the National Council of Geographic Education will soon jointly publish Guidelines for Geographic Education for Grades K-12. This document will speak to the need for geographic education, as expressed by so many recent national reports on education and by a rising tide of local actions putting geography centrally into the curriculum. Most important, this document will demonstrate how geographic education focuses on major concepts, how they recur throughout the curriculum, and how they should be represented in all levels of our school systems. It will suggest how schools can integrate these major concepts into their organized program of studies. Finally, it will identify the knowledge, skills, and perspectives that students should gain from a systematic program in geographic education.

In conclusion, we have with geography the only field of study whose primary concern is the earth as the home of human beings. Nothing could be more basic to our education if, in the

words of Archibald MacLeish, we are ". . . to see ourselves as riders on the earth together. . ."(7)

References

(1) John Updike, Rabbit is Rich (New York: Fawcett Crest), p. 114.

(2) "Dr. Studebaker Calls for Geography," NCGE Perspective, 9, no. 5 (June 1981):6. The address was delivered at a National Conference of College and University Presidents, Baltimore, Maryland, March 3-4, 1942.

(3) James A. Michener, "The Mature Social Studies Teacher," Social Education, November 1970, pp. 764-65.

(4) Paul Woodring, The Persistent Problems of Education (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1983), pp. 38-39.

(5) Thomas S. Barrows, et al., College Students' Knowledge and Beliefs: A Survey of Global Understanding, The Final Report of the Global Understanding Project, Educational Testing Service (New Rochelle, New York: Change Magazine Press, 1981).

(6) A. David Hill, "A Survey of Global Understanding of American College Students: A Report to Geographers," The Professional Geographer, 33, no. 2 (May 1981), pp. 237-45.

(7) Archibald MacLeish, Riders on the Earth (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978), p. xiv.